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GEORGE MEREDITH.*

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CAROLINA.

THE recent celebration of the eightieth birthday of the dean of English novelists, and the extraordinary tributes thereby called forth from the leading men and women of letters of the English-speaking race, challenge the attention of thoughtful students of contemporary art and thought. The belated efflorescence of the fame of George Meredith, this sudden twilight emergence from the shrine of submerged renown to the pedestal of acknowledged fame, warrants the suspicion, and indeed quite patently provokes the question, as to whether the standard of taste and the ethical tone of our time are not at last discovering in him a true spokesman and interpreter. It is a neglected, rather than a forgotten, fact that the ideas prevailing at any particular period are of two distinct classes. On the one hand, there are the ideas which are in everybody's mind—the clamant topics of popular discussion, wide dissemination and general acceptance. On the other hand, the really fertile and germinating ideas which overleap the boundaries of the present and, being endowed with prophetic potency, herald and announce the future, are known to only a few, and are recognized by them as the ideas which the world must shortly be induced to ponder. Not ideas only, but standards of art and the laws of taste, furnish exemplification of this bipartite evolutionary phenomenon. It is difficult to parry the conclusion that George Meredith's fame strengthens its claim upon posterity by reason of long-delayed acknowledgment. The educative influence of his fictive achievement, so arabesque, so fantastically kaleidoscopic, so ravishingly

* "The Pocket Edition of the Works of George Meredith." In 16 volumes. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York.

tortuous, yet withal so clear-visioned, so intense and so hardily sane, has been imperceptibly if glacially slow and sure. It is not too much to say that, in the large sense, the discrepancy between his recognition and his deserts in the past is to be explained by the fact that he was ahead of, rather than behind, his age. His tutelage in self-discipline, his devotion to the law of the "stern-exact" and his fidelity to the instinctive integrity of his taste rather than to the clamor of popular authority, assured him a serene passage through the ordeal of public reprobation, indifference and neglect. In his own words:

"Ye that nourish hopes of fame!
Ye who would be known in song!
Ponder old History, and duly frame
Your souls to meek acceptance of the thong.

"Lo! of hundreds who aspire
Eighties perish—nineties tire!
They who bear up, in spite of wrecks and wracks,
Were seasoned by celestial hail of thwacks.

"Fortune in this mortal race
Builds on thwackings for its base;
Thus the All-Wise doth make a flail a staff,
And separates his heavenly corn from chaff."

Meredith persevered heroically in the resolution "to paint man man, whatever the issue." And while we rejoice to-day in the discovery that the "heavenly corn" has at last been separated from the "chaff," the confession remains to be made that the "thwackings" were — oh! distinctly — "terrestrial." "If the gods showed their love for Shelley by causing him to die young," Mr. Trevelyan pointedly remarks, "they have shown their love for Mr. Meredith in a more satisfactory manner, by leaving him to receive from us in old age the homage that was due to him from our grandfathers." *

The intermingled strains of Irish and Welsh blood in Meredith's veins, derived respectively from mother and father, doubtless serve to account in part for his fantastic *esprit*, as well as for his reverential attitude toward Nature. The fact that he was born and has lived in England finds equally persistent verifica-

* "The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith." By G. M. Trevelyan. Archibald Constable & Co., London, 1906.

tion in his novels; and the temptation to attribute undue influence to German thought in his work because of his early studies at a Moravian school in Neuwied, Germany, is rather to be resisted than yielded to. If property was left him as a boy, certain it is that, when he returned to London from his studies in Germany, he found himself compelled to wage strenuous warfare in *la lutte pour la vie*. Poverty, and not vegetarianism, enforced the possibly supposititious bowl of oatmeal upon which he is said to have lived daily for several months. Unlike Ibsen, his exact contemporary, he had no first unsold edition to turn over to the street-huxter in exchange for the price of a hearty meal; and he found himself as little attached to the profession of law, to which he first devoted his attention, as was Ibsen to the profession of pharmacy. For seven or eight years, during the late fifties and early sixties, journalism claimed his services; and we find him contributing regularly to the "Ipswich Journal" and occasionally to the "Morning Post." Noteworthy connection is found between his interest in Mazzini and Austria's Italy, as exemplified in his novel "Emilia," and his service as correspondent for the "Morning Post" during the Austro-Italian war of 1866. Serving both a journalistic and literary apprenticeship, conducting the "Fortnightly Review" in the latter part of 1867 during the absence of his friend John Morley in America, and acting for many years as reader and literary adviser to Messrs. Chapman and Hall, Meredith gradually lifted the incubus of debt, and acquired that freedom for intensive concentration to which we owe his solidest contributions to English letters. In his very first work, published in 1856, appears this stanza—startling anticipation of Omar's Rubaiyat as translated by Fitz-Gerald:

"Thou that dreamest an event,
While circumstance is but a waste of sand
Arise, take up thy fortunes in thy hand,
And daily forward pitch thy tent."

So we see him "daily forward pitch his tent," and, taking his literary fortunes in his hand, seek ultimate self-realization in temporary self-sacrifice. His first great poem, "Modern Love," envisages in some sense the disappointment of his first marriage—with the witty young widow, Mrs. Nicholls, daughter of the author of "Crotchet Castle," Thomas Love Peacock. In 1862,

after her death, he went to live for a short time with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Rossetti and Swinburne, on Cheyne Walk of Carlylean memory.

Meredith was afterwards married again; his second wife died in 1885 and is buried near his present home of Box Hill. His life in his sylvan retreat in Surrey, with the immediate companionship of his wife, his two sons and a young daughter, was varied by weekly visits to London, where he carried on his affairs and enjoyed social intercourse with a coterie which numbered among its members Swinburne, James Thomson, Justin MacCarthy, John Morley and Lady Duff Gordon. Undismayed by the conviction that he was writing for an immediate audience, apathetic if not actually antipathetic to his work, he produced book after book, marked by sanity of utterance, philosophic poise and an artistic individuality which must needs ultimately compel recognition. In "Beauchamp's Career" we read:

"My way is like a Rhone island in the summer drought, stony, unattractive and difficult between the two forceful streams of the unreal and the overreal. My people conquer nothing, win none; they are actual yet uncommon. It is the clockwork of the brain that they are directed to set in motion, and—poor troop of actors to vacant benches—the conscience residing in thoughtfulness which they would appeal to; and if you are there impervious to them, we are lost; back I go to my wilderness, where, as you perceive, I have contracted the habit of listening to my own voice more than is good."

His attitude toward the public, despite an early utterance or two, is one neither of condescending superiority nor of embittered disappointment, but rather of forthright recognition of the fact that the spirit of his thoughtful laughter has not found permanent lodgment in the British intelligence. "The English people know nothing about me," Meredith once said; "there always has been something antipathetic between them and me. With book after book it was always the same outcry of censure and disapproval. The first time or two I minded it. Since, I have written to please myself."* In the America which gave the world a Howells and a James, and which to-day produces a Mrs. Wharton and a Mrs. Atherton for his delectation, Meredith found a more congenial and appreciative audience; and, only the other day, he said: "They have always liked me better

* Henry W. Nevinson, in the "Daily Chronicle," July 5, 1905.

in America. They don't care about me in England." Significant, indeed, is the circumstance that those two brilliant and whimsical examples of Celtic wit, paradox, fantasy and imagination, radical, rationalistic and *intransigent*, George Meredith and Bernard Shaw, found their sincerest appreciation and recognition, neither in the land of their adoption nor in the land of their nativity, but in a land upon which they had never set foot. America anticipated England in her appreciation of Wagner, as to-day it outranks England in appreciation of Ibsen; and the catholicity of American taste finds further verification in its saner, more balanced appreciation of Great Britain's greatest living novelist, George Meredith.

Ibsen's reply to the charge that his "Peer Gynt" was not poetry is historic. "My book is poetry," he wrote to Georg Brandes in 1867; "and if it is not, then it will be. The conception of poetry in our country, in Norway, shall be made to conform to the book." While such a defiance is wholly alien to Meredith's spirit, it is nevertheless true that he has based his hope upon the alteration of public taste in regard to the function and art of fiction. He wrote to the author of an article in the "Harvard Monthly":

"When at the conclusion of your article on my works you say that a certain change in public taste, should it come about, will be to some extent due to me, you hand me the flowering wreath I covet. For I think that all right use of life, and the one secret of life, is to pave ways for the firmer footing of those who succeed us; and, as to my works, I know them faulty, think them of worth only when they point and aid to that end. Close knowledge of our fellows, discernment of the laws of existence, these lead to great civilization. I have supposed that the novel exposing and illustrating the history of man may help us to such sustaining roadside gifts."

Meredith's purpose is to dilate the imagination, to "arouse the inward vision" to a recognition of the limitations of human character, and upon such recognition to base veracious records of contemporary existence.

It is now many years since Thomas Hardy first said that the novel had taken a turn for analyzing, rather than depicting, character and emotion. The contemporary reader is no longer allowed to cherish the comfortable feeling that a novel is a novel as a pudding is a pudding, in Mr. Henry James's phrase, and that our only business with it would be to swallow it! Physical

and material action no longer usurps the position of primary interest; the casual and the adventitious play rôles of decreasing, and ever-decreasing, importance; and the "story," once thought supreme, has come to occupy a subsidiary place in a fiction concerned less with actual events themselves, than with the subtle, and oftentimes indescribably complex, motives and impulses which prompt to action. Even passion, if unanimated by thought, or intelligent choice, ceases to hold the attention of the world as formerly: the soul has her histories as well as the body. "A psychological reason is, to my imagination, an object adorably pictorial," says Mr. Henry James, "to catch the tints of its complexion, I feel as if that idea might inspire one to Titianesque effects. There are few things more exciting to me, in short, than a psychological reason." Throughout Meredith's entire work, whether poetry or fiction, it is "the conscience residing in thoughtfulness" to which he consistently appeals. "Narrative is nothing," he frankly admits. "It is the mere vehicle of philosophy. The interest is in the idea which action serves to illustrate."

In this remark lies the germ of Meredith's philosophy of fiction, or perhaps it would be equally accurate to say, his fiction of philosophy. The strength of his position is the result of his hardy sanity in resisting both the extravagant blandishments of idealism and the morbid fascinations of realism. If at times he mounts the Hippogriff and soars lightly away to roseate regions of air, it is but a momentary prank of the Celtic troll, flirting with the Daemon of the Epoch. If at other times his justice, untempered by mercy, wrings our hearts as if in stern cruelty, it is not the naturalistic "mutilation of humanity," bitterly complained of by Brunetière, with which Meredith visits us, but a hardy lesson in the practice of self-mastery, through which his characters masterfully "find themselves." Uniting within himself the romantic instinct with the realistic sense of character, Meredith early made the discovery that fiction must be neither mere fanciful narrative nor realistically objective elaboration, but rational, clear-visioned interpretation of the facts and materials of existence. He has suffered sadly for his boldness in maintaining that fiction is more instructive than life. Even Wilde, who admired him extravagantly and showed his influence, was driven to say: "As a writer, he has mastered

everything except language; as a novelist, he can do everything except tell a story; as an artist, he is everything except articulate."

It is true in a sense that art is really a form of exaggeration; for "selection, which is the very spirit of art, is nothing more than an intensified mode of over-emphasis." Not the least significant of Meredith's claims to high consideration is his faith in, and practice of, the doctrine that Art without Thought is dead. Romance alone gives us idealization of life unfortified by the realities of every-day existence. Realism alone presents the epidermis of reality, exhibiting facts unillumined by the reasoning spirit. The function of the artist, in Meredith's view, is to inform his narrative with thought, to give consistent directive emphasis—cultural, ethical, social—to his composition. Art, to Meredith, is synthesis rather than description, interpretation rather than narration. To hold the kodak up to nature is a task accomplished automatically by every shop window in Cheapside; to integrate concepts, to envelop facts with truth, to enlarge narration through selective emphasis—this, indeed, is the glory as well as the responsibility, of the fictionist of the future. Bernard Shaw has averred that fine art is the subtlest, the most seductive, the most effective, means of moral propagandism in the world, excepting only the example of personal conduct; and he waives even this exception in favor of the art of the stage, "because it works by exhibiting examples of personal conduct made intelligible and moving to crowds of unob-servant, unreflecting people to whom real life means nothing." Meredith does not look upon fiction merely as a Zolaesque instrument of moral propagandism; nor does he hold with Mr. Howells that we should write only of contemporary life. Says Meredith:

" 'The fiction which is the summary of actual Life . . . is philosophy's handmaiden'; and he would animate fiction with the fires of positive brainstuff, in order to raise the Art of Fiction to a level with History. 'Brainstuff is not lean stuff; the brainstuff of fiction is internal history . . .,' he says. 'The forecast may be hazarded that if we do not speedily embrace philosophy in fiction the Art is doomed to extinction under the shining multitude of its professors. They are fast capping the candle. Instead, therefore, of objurgating the timid intrusions of philosophy, invoke her presence, I pray you. History without her is the skeleton map of events: Fiction a picture of figures modelled on no skeleton anatomy. But each, with philosophy in aid, blooms and is hu-

manly shapely. 'To demand of us truth to nature, excluding philosophy, is really to bid a pumpkin caper.'"

The real difficulty in criticism and appreciation of a literary artist at once critical and creative is to draw the delicate and subtle distinctions between his expressed ideal and his actual achievement. To what extent, for instance, does Meredith actually put into practice the principles he advocates with such charming reasonableness? And what is this mysterious "philosophy" to which he attributes such miraculous powers? I think we may find the clue in Meredith's claim that the brain-stuff of fiction is internal history; and the desiderated "philosophy" is the instrument for reading this internal history aright. That is to say, Meredith not unnaturally wishes to see fiction written in the light of some comprehension of human nature. And so, after all, the primary consideration is Meredith's conception of the nature of humanity and of the forces which must operate in achieving social, ethical and spiritual emancipation. The epitome of his fiction is personal history, the vicissitudes, failures and struggles of the individual to arrive at self-realization. This self-realization is the discovery that Earth is man's true mother,

"His well of earth, his home of rest,
And fair to scan."

Earth has her highest life in the works of man, and from her man derives his spiritual qualities. "We do not get to any Heaven by renouncing the Mother we spring from; and when there is an eternal secret for us, it is best to believe that Earth knows, to keep near her, even in our utmost aspirations." He asks no selfish, extravagant boons of Nature, desires only that he may read her aright and see "stern joy her origin," and is content to acknowledge that

"He may entreat, aspire,
He may despair, and she has never heed.
She drinking his warm sweat will soothe his need,
Not his desire."

Alongside his faith in Nature comes his confidence in the efficacy and validity of rationalistic process. Like Bernard Shaw, he believes that "to life, the force behind the man, intellect is a necessity, for without it he blunders into death"; faith in

Nature undirected by thought may well lead us astray. Instinctive feeling, guided by intelligence and fortified by genuine passion, will enable man to rise nobly to the heights of his possibilities. Brain, blood and spirit are the indissoluble trinity, three in one and one in three, of the Meredithian perfect man:

"Each of each in sequent birth,
Blood and brain and spirit."

Such a conception—of the "temperament of common sense fired by enthusiasm and controlled by humor"—makes comprehensible to us at once his definition of passion as noble thought on fire. And in Meredith's fictive histories the hero totters and tumbles because he obeys one of the three constituent forces to the neglect or exclusion of the others. The soul is co-existent with, and in a sense the interaction of, brain and blood. And the man who can assert

"I am the Master of my fate,
I am the Captain of my soul"

is he who can say, as does one of Meredith's own characters: "I am not to follow any impulse that is not the impulse of *all* my nature—myself altogether."

This is Meredith's clue to the progressive evolution of society. "Man may be rebellious against his time and his laws, but if he is really for nature, he is not lawless." In his novels, Meredith portrays the "epic encounter" perpetually waged between Man in his instinctive temperament and the laws, institutions and traditions which the majority at any given epoch accept for their governance in mutual relationship. At the beginning of the nineteenth chapter of "One of Our Conquerors" he says:

"There is at times in the hearts of all men of active life a vivid wild moment or two of dramatic dialogue between the veteran antagonists Nature and Circumstance, where they, whose business it should be to be joyfully one, furiously split; and the Dame is up with her shrillest querulousness to inquire of her offspring for the distinct original motive of his conduct. . . . If he be not an alienated issue of the Great Mother, he will strongly incline to her view, that he put himself into harness with a machine going the dead contrary way of her welfare and thereby wrote himself a donkey for his present reading. . . . But it is asked by the disputant, If we had followed her exclusively, how far should we have travelled from our starting-point? We of the world and its prizes and duties must do her an injury to make her tongue musical to us, and her argument worthy of our attention!"

Meredith's attitude as a critic of society, finding concrete exemplification in his novels, is philosophically exhibited in that contemporary classic, the "Essay on Comedy." Meredith occupies the middle ground of sanity between the complacent adherent of current institutions and the violent Utopist, who desires to shatter this sorry scheme of things *entire*. In his novels, he "throws no infamous reflection upon life"; the Comic Spirit, as he portrays it, is in direct opposition to cynicism. Mr. Gilbert Chesterton maintains that when we want any art tolerably brisk and bold we have to go to the doctrinaires. Meredith is wholly out of sympathy with the social doctrinaires, those popular writers, conscious of fatigue in creativeness, who "desire to be cogent in a modish cynicism: perversions of the idea of life, and of the proper esteem for the society we have wrested from brutishness, and would carry higher." It is quite clear that Meredith, with all his passion for improving social conditions, his desire to place woman on an equality with man, to establish a more rational basis for the institution of marriage, wishes to build upon the foundations of our present social structure. His plea is for alterations and modifications of social conditions on the basis of hardly won reforms, and not for construction of a new social fabric after destruction of the old. His remark about the Comic Poet is perfect in its application to himself: "He is not concerned with beginnings or endings or surroundings, but with what you are now weaving. To understand his work and value it, you must have a sober liking of your kind and a sober estimate of our civilized qualities." Like his own Comic Poet, he believes that our civilization is founded on common sense, and that it is the first condition of sanity to believe it; and in this sense is Meredith the true conservative. The function of Comedy, it would appear, then, is less the destruction, than the sublimation and evolutional development, of established morals:

"If you believe that our civilization is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half-tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long bow, was once

a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lighted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions, and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or ruined with conceit, individually or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic spirit.”*

Certain restrictions are inevitably imposed upon the artist, by his temperament, his attitude toward his art, and his philosophy of life. Meredith's avowed purpose of minting and putting into active circulation the gold of the philosopher carries with it the obligation to remove from the characters the stigma of abstract theory by vital and essentially human treatment. He says in “Sandra Belloni”:

“Such is the construction of my story . . . that to entirely deny the Philosopher the privilege he stipulated for when with his assistance I conceived it, would render our performance unintelligible to that acute and honorable minority which consents to be thwacked with aphorisms and sentences and a fantastic delivery of the verities. While my Play goes on, I must permit him to come forward occasionally. We are indeed in a sort of partnership, and it is useless for me to tell him that he is not popular and destroys my chance.”

It is a curious, and almost tragic, limitation of Meredith's art that the vitality, the verisimilitude of the characters is, perhaps not infrequently, in inverse ratio to the abstractness of the theory which they are set in motion to embody. His characters suffer in reality through the pre-conceived theory their author compels them to exemplify. One often feels that instead of opening a window into the soul, Meredith has merely opened a casement

* “An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit.” By George Meredith. Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1897.

of the brain; the rattling of the machinery of this *deus ex machina* persists in making itself audible, charm he never so wisely.

Meredith is incapable of final artistic self-sacrifice: he cannot resist the fascination of the rôle of ideal spectator. He ravishes us with his sense of the ironic contrast between the logic of the situation and the exhibition of the human will; but he cannot spare us the intrusion of his own charming personality. Quaint, fantastic, original, he interposes between the reader and his creations the viewless barrier of his own personality; his characters are unusual because, by some subtle alchemy of the fictive art, they assume the color of his own temperament.

It is Meredith's great achievement that, despite his theoretical divagations, his extraneous philosophic observations, his inability to resist the temptation to speak through the mouths of his characters, his unconscious faculty of imparting to his characters the tone and hue of his own nature, his characters live with a vital, a passionate energy drenched with thought for which we have to go to Ibsen to find a parallel. "It argues no lack of appreciation of his rich intellectual endowment," writes Mrs. M. Sturge Henderson, "to say that, when Meredith's achievement is estimated as a whole, it occupies a secondary place. His inspiration appears to lie in his poetic grasp, the intensity of realization with which he holds to the main issue and keeps it living, in defiance of the tangles of complexity he is forever weaving every side of it, and which might have been expected to prove fatal to the life within." *

If at times, as I have pointed out, Meredith's abstract theories give a sort of rigidity and glacial unreality to his creatures, in general his philosophical attitude toward art and life has given such meaning and significance to his fictive product that it bids fair to stand as a permanent memorial of this age of transitional social and moral values, of fantastic brilliancy and peccant individualism, of philosophic bias and ethical inspiration. His fiction points the way to, and is a permanently notable effort to achieve, the fictive art of the future, portraying our systems fortified by philosophy. In words which may with slight discount be applied to his own art he says:

* "George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer." Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1907.

"Then, ah! then . . . will the novelist's Art, now neither blushless infant nor executive man, have attained its majority. We can then be veraciously historical, honestly transcriptive. Rose-pink and dirty drab will alike have passed away. Philosophy is the foe of both, and their silly cancelling contest, perpetually renewed in a shuffle of extremes, as it always is where a phantasm falseness reigns, will no longer baffle the contemplation of natural flesh, smother no longer the soul issuing out of our incessant strife. Philosophy bids us to see that we are not so pretty as rose-pink, not so repulsive as dirty drab; and that, instead of everlastingly shifting those barren aspects, the sight of ourselves is wholesome, bearable, fructifying, finally a delight. Do but perceive that we are coming to philosophy, the stride toward it will be a giant's—a century a day. And imagine the celestial refreshment of having a pure decency in the place of sham; real flesh; a soul born active, wind-beaten, but ascending."

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